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The 340-room resort hotel and casino has been running at virtually 100% occupancy for most of the year, according to Morton, and management is now seriously considering an addition to the property, as well as possibly a second location in another city.

Instead of the usual buffets, the Hard Rock features Mr. Lucky's, "a 24-hour restaurant that is not your typical Las Vegas 24-hour coffee shop," says Morton.

"Rather than the sort of sterile coffee shop you usually see, with a very homogenized design, Mr. Lucky's has a very youthful identity, from the people working there to the decor, and serves everything from prime rib to barbecued chicken, pizzas, fresh fish and salads."

The 24-hour restaurant is complemented by Mortoni's, an elegant yet relaxed Italian restaurant of contemporary design. Adjacent to the hotel is the Las Vegas Hard Rock Cafe, which has had a record year since the hotel's opening.

"The synergy between the two is incredible, with the Cafe bringing guests into the casino, and vice versa," says Morton, noting that the already busy restaurant has experienced roughly a 15% lift since the hotel/casino opened its doors.

On The Boardwalk

In Atlantic City, gambling is still the main attraction.

ATLANTIC CITY REMAINS A very different market from Las Vegas, largely due to geography. Just a day trip away from New York, Philadelphia, Baltimore and Washington, D.C., Atlantic City attracts fewer vacationers and more people who come just to gamble, according to Mike Mellon, executive director of food and beverage at Trump Plaza.

"We have 55 million people within a gas tank of Atlantic City," Mellon points out. "The guests who come here like the food and good shows, and we're always looking for other things to keep people occupied and to get them here," he adds. "I don't think you're going to see the kinds of theme parks and huge, fantasy resorts you have today in Las Vegas. Trop World was the only property here with a theme park, and they just dismantled it, while business in Atlantic City today is up 15% over last year."

ON THE OTHER HAND, MORE themed and brand-name restaurants are coming to Atlantic City casinos, including California Pizza Kitchen at the Resorts Casino Hotel, the Hard Rock Cafe, which will open at the Trump Taj Mahal late this year, and Hooters, which will open in the new Trump Plaza Regency Tower also later this year.

"All the big [restaurant] chains are knocking on casino doors, wanting to be a part of this," Mellon says. "When you can dangle in front of them 33 million people coming here every year, they have to believe they can make money by locating in our operations."

The other trend Atlantic City shares with Las Vegas is a growing emphasis on communicating value through quality rather than price, and a shift to making food and beverage at least somewhat self-supporting, if not entirely profitable.

To this end, some properties are starting to market their restaurant facilities as stand-alone dining attractions, not just amenities for casino guests. The Resorts Casino Hotel is developing a series of wine tasting dinners in its fine-dining rooms that will be "strictly a retail event," says F&B director Jay Chesterton.

"We want to give the general public exposure to our dining rooms, and let them know we have a very good dining product," he explains. "Of course, it is also hoped the series will generated some added exposure for the casino/hotel."

Upscale outlets at the Resort Casino Hotel include its flagship Le Palais, which serves a cross between "continental and progressive American" cuisine, says Chesterton; the Italian Capriccio and Camelot, a medieval-themed steak and seafood place. Average checks at these restaurants run $33-$36 per person, excluding any

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